

Beyond the Boundaries of Women's Sphere: Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* and Alcott's *Little Women*

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Abstract

Reexamining the concept of "home" in Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* and Alcott's *Little Women*, we can reevaluate these two bestsellers labeled as sentimental and moralistic: one is a largely forgotten literary work which conveys the religious message, the other a girls' story known as a masterpiece of juvenile literature. Though they were totally different in their aims, the two New England female writers expressed in their novels the women's power which allowed them to transcend the boundaries of the domestic sphere. This new perspective of domesticity gained by Phelps and Alcott after the Civil War can be viewed as an important part of the movement for deconstructing the ideology of "women's sphere."

It cannot be denied that the concept of the "separate spheres" has been most influential in the study of nineteenth-century American women's literature. However, as Cathy N. Davidson suggests in her essay "Preface: No More Separate Spheres!" other categories "complicate the separate spheres paradigm, especially with regard to issues of race, sexuality, class, region, religion, occupation, and other variables." Amy Kaplan also reexamines the "separate spheres" and emphasizes the "coterminous" nature of domesticity, nationalism, and imperialism. Ac-

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According to Kaplan, domesticity is not “an anchor, a feminine counterforce to the male activity of territorial conquest,” but “more mobile and less stabilizing; it travels in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation and to produce shifting conceptions of the foreign.”¹ A more recent book on this theme is *Separate Spheres No More: Gender Convergence in American Literature 1830-1930* edited by Monika M. Elbert. She says in her introduction that these essays “attempt to revise notions of male/female or public/private and to destabilize the myth of binary thinking as set forth in a ‘separate spheres’ ideology,” and represent a tendency to “move away from separatism to reconciliation or a blurring of the spheres.”²

In their collaborative work, *The American Woman's Home* (1869), Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe argue that women's rightful place is in the home, where they can exert their authority over their children and husbands, which fact eventually helps to lead to the progress of society.³ They “promulgated the metaphor of home as a social sphere of power.”⁴ In her New England novel, *Oldtown Folks* (1869), Harriet Beecher Stowe testifies to the enlargement of the “women's sphere,” connecting the “private sphere” to the area of New England.⁵ In the story, some children including orphans, who were physically and psychologically abused by the rigid principles of Calvinism dominant throughout New England, were delivered by those women and mothers who embody such domestic values as maternal kindness, Christian love, and self-sacrifice. In short, Stowe created New England's maternal, not patriarchal rules in her novel and expanded the concept of “home.”

These maternal values Stowe depicted in her novel are not exactly the same as the female values Barbara Welter called “the cult of true womanhood.”⁶ While “the cult of true womanhood” is very limited and confined and forces women to

stay in the home, Stowe's matriarchal world can be seen as developing and expanding beyond it. Because women still stay at home and domesticity and maternity are highly evaluated, Stowe has not apparently succeeded in effecting a revolution in the concept of women's status, but there is no doubt that, after the Civil War, "the cult of true womanhood" has gradually given way to the new perspective of "home" in American women's writing.

Around the year when Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* was published, two bestsellers were generated by American women writers: one was *The Gates Ajar* (1869) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911), the other *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888). The former was recognized as an example of "sentimental religion' or female-dominated consolation literature"⁷ at that time because of its religious message. It is chiefly concerned with the salvation of the heroine who has lost her brother in the Civil War. The latter is well known as a masterpiece of juvenile literature and has been very popular until now. The aims of these two novels are totally different: Phelps wanted to give voice to "the women,—the helpless, outnumbering, unconsulted women; they whom war trampled down, without a choice or protest"; and Alcott was asked to write a "girls' story" by Thomas Niles, a partner in the enterprising Boston firm of Roberts Brothers.⁸ Because of this difference, there seems to be little or no connection between these two stories. But to read these novels closely makes us notice that they have something in common: For example, both are works of literature written by women, for women, and about women, and the Civil War provides an important context for both. In this paper, I will examine whether these two bestsellers, a story of religion and a "girls' story," can be read in conjunction with Stowe's new idea of "home" that began to emerge after the Civil War.

The Gates Ajar is largely forgotten today, but it was enormously popular in the post-Civil War period. It sold “80,000 copies in America and passed the 100,000 mark in England before the end of the century,” and it was translated into many languages such as German, French, and Dutch. Moreover, a number of “gates ajar” products were produced: collar and tippet, cigar, funeral wreath, and patent medicine.⁹ In contrast, it has failed to attract the attention of literary critics from the time of its publication until now. Josephine Donovan argues, “Most of Phelps’s early stories, those written in the 1860’s are insignificant sentimental pieces,” which are, in her opinion, “optimistic,”¹⁰ and Carol Farley Kessler spares less pages for *The Gates Ajar* than Phelps’s other works like *The Story of Avis* and *The Silent Partner* in her book, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*.¹¹ But if we take the recent feminist criticism of the “separate spheres” that aim to destabilize the boundary of “home” into consideration, it might be possible for us to reevaluate this largely forgotten novel.

The story is written in the form of the diary of Mary Cabot, who is a twenty-four-year-old girl in the New England village of Homer. It began with Mary’s despondency over the loss of her brother, Royal, in the Civil War just one week before the war’s end. She was overwhelmed by grief and at a loss in her house, alone and lost in an emotional and spiritual crisis. Because her parents died some years before, Royal was the only member of the family she had and very special to her. Now she was left alone as an orphan. She lamented:

It is horrible. It was cruel. Roy, all I had in the wide world,—Roy, with the flash in his eyes, with his smile that lighted the house all up; with his pretty, soft hair that I used to kiss and curl about my fingers, his bounding step, his strong arms that folded me in and cared for me,— Roy snatched away in an

instant by a dreadful God, and laid out there in the wet and snow,—in the hideous wet and snow,—never to kiss him, never to see him any more!¹²

After her brother's death, Mary began to feel confined and imprisoned in her home. She wrote that "The house feels like a prison. I walk up and down and wonder that I ever called it home"(5) and "it is just as if a great black gate swung to and barred out the future, and barred out him, and left me all alone in any world that I can ever live in, forever and forever"(37). It is clear that her feeling of being "shut in and walled in"(7) shows how miserable and dejected she has become in her lonely house. Yet, her overwhelming sense of domestic confinement seems to come from the pressure of the patriotic, man-centered, and Calvinistic society.

As is indicated by her words: "I think it must be that there never was another like Roy. Then we have lived together so long, we two alone, since father died, that he had grown to me, heart of my heart, and life of my life" (9), Mary was entirely devoted to her brother. She had done nothing but to love her brother and take care of him when he was with her. Now that her brother died, she had nothing significant to do. With the loss of her brother, she has also lost her own being. Though she behaved herself as faithfully as she was expected to do in the patriarchal society, Mary came to feel restrained in her prison-like home when she found that she couldn't be happy without Roy in whom she had invested all her life.

Another thing that Mary was expected to do as a woman was to control and suppress her grief. Some friends and neighbors came to console her. Meta Tripp, who had lost her brother in the war too, said that Mary "shouldn't feel so sad by and by" and that "she felt very sad at first when Jack died, but everybody got

over that after a time”(9). Mrs. Bland, the minister’s wife, wished that Mary “would exert herself more to see her friends and receive comfort in her affliction” because “people would talk”(11). And Deacon Quirk came and said that it was her duty, “as a Christian and a church-member, to be resigned”(14), and when Mary said she couldn’t feel resigned, he looked at her as he would look at “a Mormon or a Hottentot” causing her to “wonder[ed] whether he were going to excommunicate”(14) her on the spot. Mary was forced by her community to “become resigned in an arithmetical manner, and comforted according to the Rule of Three.” As Lisa A. Long argues, “religious and political leaders used ‘jingoistic Christianity’ to drum up support for the Holy National Cause”¹³ to justify the soldiers’ self-sacrifice. This rhetoric, which is male-oriented and man-centered and excludes women’s psychological agony, was generally accepted at that time and was used to enforce resignation on women.

It is obvious that this social custom of demanding an emotional discipline of women even at the tragic moment is a product of the patriarchal principles that force women to follow “the cult of true womanhood.” In fact, Mary’s problem of loss is, as Nancy Schnog explains, “a problem engendered by the domestic ideology attendant to the devided spheres.”¹⁴ Mary’s inner turmoil and her feeling that home is a confined place are elicited not only by her loss of her beloved brother but also by the restricted and constrained patriarchal system. Mary’s affliction suggests that women’s psychological problem after the Civil War could not be solved only by the domestic ideology that men had produced and imposed on women.

Thanks to the help of a motherly woman, Aunt Winifred, however, Mary is gradually emancipated from her affliction and domestic captivity and is led to a heavenly home. Comparing Winifred with Deacon Quirk and the minister, Dr.

Bland, who blindly accepted the orthodox Calvinism of New England, we can see why Winifred can serve to rid Mary of her pain. After Roy's death, Mary began to hate God and regard herself as a Pagan, though she had been "a member of an Evangelical church, in good and regular standing!" for six years. She said, "God does not seem to me just now what He used to. He has dealt very bitterly with me"(13). Deacon Quirk accused Mary of being "in such a rebellious state of mind" (13) and admonished her, saying that "Afflictions come from God, and, however afflictin' or however crushin' they may be, it is our duty to submit to them"(14).

Though Dr. Bland was "a scholarly man, in his way"(48), he sometimes chose a hymn unsuited to the occasion, insulted his wife in his sermon, and gave a picture of heaven which was very vague and abstract. He declared that heaven was "an eternal state," "a state of holiness," and "a state of happiness"(48). Insisting that "In the world of bliss our hearts would glow with holy love alike to all other holy hearts"(49), Dr. Bland, like Deacon Quirk, emphasized the importance of resignation: "When he removes our friends from the scenes of time..., we should resign ourselves to his will, remembering that the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away in mercy"(50). Mary wrote about his sermon in her diary,

It is fortunate that I did not hear it while I was alone; it would have made me desperate. Going hungry, hopeless, blinded, I came back empty, uncom-
forted, groping. I wanted something actual, something pleasant, about this
place into which Roy has gone. He gave me glittering generalities, cold com-
monplace, vagueness, unreality, a God and a future at which I sat and shiv-
ered. (51)

On the other hand, Aunt Winifred's vision of heaven was absolutely different

from theirs. It was loving, human, and concrete. Unlike the severe Calvinistic God, Winifred's God was tolerant and affectionate, and she emphasized God's unselfish love: "He has taught you to sanctify that love through love to Him. Would it be like Him to create such beautiful and unselfish loves,—most like the love of heaven of any type we know"(51). She insisted that her God didn't want Mary to resign herself to her fate and explained that God only took Roy out of Mary's sight for a while. In her words, "he goes on loving" because he is "not lost, nor asleep, nor annihilated"(60). After she had bitterly blamed Dr. Bland for his abstraction by saying to his face that "it makes me cold. I am very much alive and human; and Christ was human God," Winifred said to herself, "I only wish that he would stop preaching and teaching things that he knows nothing about" (75).

Moreover, Winifred's teaching of heaven is literal and particularized. While the Deacon declared that people in heaven "glorify God, and sing Worthy the Lamb!" and are "clothed in white robes with palms in their hands, and bow before the Great White Throne"(103), Winifred gave a graphic account of it and told Mary that there are "trees and flowers and houses and such in heaven"(104). She further explained that "there shall be new earth, as well as new heavens. It is noticeable, also, that the descriptions of heaven, although a series of metaphors, are yet singularly earthlike and tangible ones. Are flowers and skies and trees less 'spiritual' than white dresses and little palm-branches? In fact, where are you going to get your little branches without trees?"(105). Although, in spite of his words that "I believe in a spiritual heaven," the Deacon impressed Mary as "earthy," "obstinate," and "stupid," Winifred looked "heavenly," "serene," and "saintly" because, as Mary thought, "every inch of her, body and soul" was refined "by the long nearness of her heart to Christ"(104).

The biggest difference between the Deacon and the minister's teaching on the

one hand and Winifred's on the other is shown through her motherhood and maternity. Phelps describes Winifred as a very motherly woman (she is actually the mother of a girl named Faith), emphasizing her peacefulness, delicacy, and "gentle, motherly way"(73) and comparing her to Raphael's Madonna. Winifred brought great comfort to Mary when she lulled her as if Mary was her real child. Mary wrote that "a gentle arm crept about me, and she had gathered me into her lap and laid my head on her shoulder, as she might have gathered Faith." Because nobody had held her for so long and "everything seemed to break up and unlock in a minute"(36), she threw up her hands and cried for a long time. Winifred's "strong, decided words, 'I am going to help you'" were so moving and consolatory to Mary that she assumed she "could be helped"(36). Mary Louise Kete defines this "help of others" as "sentimental collaboration," which offers "the promise of consolation" to "a spiritual response to the losses caused by the war."¹⁵

As her spiritual pain was gradually relieved through Winifred's motherly love, Mary began to find her "home" to be no longer a restrictive place. We are told that her life with Aunt Winifred and Faith had become very "home-like"(35), and Winifred's old lullaby to Faith was so "home-like" and "pleasant" in the silent house that, on her way to bed, Phoebe, a housemaid was "stopping on the garret-stairs to listen to it" and even "the cat comes mewling up to the door, and purring"(33). In short, Winifred had transformed Mary's prison-like "home" into a happy and utopian "home" where no Calvinistic, unhuman, and male-oriented religion and philosophy are to be found. Instead of the "home" generated on the patriarchal principles, Winifred had created a matriarchal "home" where women live happily, helping to console and influence their sisters by means of their domestic power, motherly care and Christian love.

In the novel, Winifred exerted her maternal power not only over Mary but also over the Deacon's son, Abinadab, and Dr. and Mrs. Bland. Though Abinadab had come to lapse from faith, Winifred helped him to form the distinct idea of the coming heaven and a Christ-like life. When Mrs. Bland was fatally burned, Winifred tried to remove the pain from the dying woman and ease her soul, while Dr. Bland was dazed and fainting. When Mrs. Bland expressed her anxiety for her four children after her death, Winifred comforted and encouraged her by saying, "You shall be just as much their mother, every day of their lives, as you have been here.... He sees. He loves them. He loves you"(141). Moreover, Winifred helped Dr. Bland to discard his Calvinistic idea of heaven and accept Winifred's pleasant idea of it. When he finally gave up his long-embraced doctrine, "a certain indefinable humanness softens his eyes and tones"(147), and his sermon became "pleasant" and "helpful".

At the end of the story, after Winifred died of breast cancer, Mary decided to nurture Winifred's daughter, Faith. As Mary had been helped by Winifred's motherly power, so she was now going to play the role of a surrogate mother. Long argues that *The Gates Ajar* is a "journey toward self-discovery."¹⁶ Though Mary had once lost herself in the patriarchal society, at last she succeeded in discovering her identity as Faith's surrogate mother in the matriarchal society. Both Winifred and Mary can exert their maternal love and authority over not only their own children but also other people's children, positioning themselves in "women's rightful place." It is by no means a radical way of changing the patriarchal society, but certainly one way for women to expand their own sphere. Though several critics compare *The Gates Ajar* with Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* with regard to feminized religion,¹⁷ its themes of recovery of matriarchy and enlargement of "home" can be found more evidently in *Oldtown Folks* than in *The Min-*

ister's Wooing. We can conclude that Phelps is Stowe's self-appointed successor, in the sense that she has urged American women to assert their motherly power to transcend the boundaries of the domestic sphere.

Little Women was published on October 1, 1868 and by the end of October, the first edition of two thousand copies had been sold.¹⁸ This "girls' story" was such a huge success that it has never fallen out of print since then, and has been revised for films several times. But it was only valued for its "improving effect on the young" and its style of "an agreeable little story" by nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century critics.¹⁹ In the 1970s, the women's movement in response to the civil rights movement and the recovery of Alcott's sensational or gothic stories worked together to bring about the critical reevaluation of *Little Women*. Yet the reaction to the rediscovery of Alcott's sensational fiction, at first, was "to see in Alcott a victim, one whose rebellious nature could only find expression in her anonymous and pseudonymous works."²⁰ This can be partly true because, to tell the truth, Alcott was reluctant to write a "girls' story": "I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls, or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it."²¹ And a "girls' story," which Alcott called "moral pap for the young," was supposed to be moralistic and conservative. Elaine Showalter explains: "Essentially moralistic, it was designed to bridge the gap between the schoolroom and the drawing room, to recommend docility, marriage, and obedience rather than autonomy or adventure."²² So it is natural that some critics place less value on *Little Women* than her sensational fiction. Martha Saxton comments that "*Little Women* was a regression for Louisa as an artist and a woman. She had abandoned the struggle for multi-faced truth and replaced it

with a programmatic morality,” and Nina Auerbach writes that “sentimental love stories were dearer to her audience, and she complied.... The anger and defiance behind the mask of nursery angel left her innocent readers untouched.”²³

But recent feminist critics have found two opposite themes of submission and subversiveness in *Little Women* and thus have widened its interpretive possibilities, which fact is evidenced by the voluminous anthology of *Little Women* criticism, *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*. In her essay, Judith Fetterley suggests that “the Civil War is an obvious metaphor for internal conflict” in *Little Women* “between its overt messages and its covert messages.”²⁴ Also Ann Douglas notices the element of subversiveness in *Little Women* and defines it as “a novel about suppression, as well as about self-expression.”²⁵

In any case, it seems that all critics, whether they regard Alcott as moralistic and submissive or decode Alcott’s “covert messages” of subversiveness, think that “home” is a very narrow and confined place in *Little Women*. Is there no possibility for the domestic sphere in *Little Women* to expand? Does the boundary of the “separate spheres” remain fixed and unviolated in it? To examine Alcott’s attitude toward “home,” I would focus my argument on the role played by Marmee.

The March family is, as Nina Auerbach declares, “explicitly matriarchal.”²⁶ It is now governed by Mrs. March because Mr. March had followed the army as chaplain and nobody knew when he would return. Although his existence as “the head of the family, the household conscience, anchor, and comforter”²⁷ is often announced in the story, actually Marmee alone manages to run the household and nurture her four daughters. Even after Mr. March returned home safely, in Part II, he was scarcely given a chance to show himself, but Marmee’s important position in the home is repeatedly emphasized throughout the story. For example,

when Marmee came back home from a visit, all the girls brightened to welcome her: "Beth put a pair of slippers down to warm...Meg stopped lecturing, and lighted the lamp, Amy got out of the easy chair without being asked, and Jo forgot how tired she was as she sat up to hold the slippers nearer to the blaze"(4-5). When Marmee went away to Washington to take care of her husband, the girls felt "as if there had been an earthquake" and "as if half the house was gone" (168). Their mother is often compared to the sun: "whatever their mood might be, the last glimpse of that motherly face was sure to affect them like sunshine" (36); and "A breath of fresh air seemed to blow through the house, and something better than sunshine brightened the quiet rooms. Everything appeared to feel the hopeful change"(188). In Auerbach's opinion, "Marmee is the god of this intense little world, half-magical in her wisdom and the spell of her presence."²⁸ That Marmee is, in a sense, God-like in her words and deeds is endorsed by the fact that Jo and Meg were "trusting in God and Mother"(188).

Although Marmee is exalted to the rank of a deity, her way of her teaching her daughters is totally different from the strict Calvinistic system of education based on the patriarchal Calvinistic philosophy. What she teaches her daughters is the importance and value of self-denial or self-sacrifice and of helping other people. The fact that her daughters have learned from Marmee to renounce the self is introduced at the very beginning of the story. Lamenting their "Christmas without any presents" because of the war and their poverty, they decided to use their money on what they wanted and to have a little fun. But when they realized that Marmee was about to come home, they changed their minds and decided to buy a Christmas gift for Marmee instead of indulging their own personal wishes. On the morning of Christmas, they again sacrificed themselves. When a boy came to Marmee, who was known as "a woman for givin' away vittles and drink, clothes

and firn””(13), and begged a favor because his poor mother with six children and a little newborn baby had no fire or anything to eat, she suggested to the girls that they should give their breakfasts as a Christmas present, and “Funny angels in hoods and mittens”(15) carried their breakfasts to the poor Hummels. Alcott writes: “This was a very happy breakfast, though they didn’t get any of it; and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning”(15-16).

In *Little Women*, as Ann K. Phillips explains, “Significantly, the word help is often associated with Marmee, and with maternal guidance.”²⁹ Helping others is one of the most important messages that Marmee has conveyed to her daughters. Marmee was “a tall, motherly lady with a ‘can-I-help-you’ look about her which was truly delightful”(7), who always offered her hand and encouraged her daughters, functioning as if she were Help in *Pilgrim’s Progress*: “We were in the Slough of Despond tonight, and Mother came and pulled us out as Help did in the book”(10). Meg thought that reading the guidebook that Marmee gave her as a Christmas present would “do” her good and “help” her “through the day”(13); when Jo tried to cure her dreadful temper but in vain, she cried, “Oh, Mother, help me, do help me!”(79), and Mother said that her “good mother used to help”(80) her to control her temper; when Amy tried to be a good girl at Aunt March’s, she “missed her mother’s help to understand and rule herself”(195). When the four girls tried their experiment of “all play and no work”(109) for a week and failed miserably, Marmee said, “I thought, as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when everyone thinks only of herself. Don’t you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another...?”(117). Marmee’s “maternal guidance” is also

shown in Part II: Marmee allowed Amy to do what she wanted to do, saying “I’ll do my best to help you”(259) when Amy planned to have a party; even after Meg married John, she needed Mother’s advice, which was “real home love and mutual helpfulness”(399); when Jo became helpless and despondent after Beth’s death, Mother “came to comfort her, not with words only, but the patient tenderness that soothes by a touch,” so that “Jo’s burden seemed easier to bear, duty grew sweeter, and life looked more endurable, seen from the safe shelter of her mother’s arms”(433).

Though Marmee’s “watchwords of this women’s world”³⁰ are conquering oneself and thinking of others, they have been deduced not from the patriotic or Calvinistic values but from the matriarchal and moralistic ones. Barbara Sicherman explains that “the old Calvinistic worldview that emphasized sin and obedience to the deity has been replaced by a moral outlook in which self-discipline and doing good to others come first.”³¹ Moreover, Christianity in *Little Women* also gives place to maternity. Though *Little Women* is not so religious as *The Gates Ajar*, it uses John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* as its framing device. The metaphor of *Pilgrim’s Progress* in the novel is transformed into its female version because “women do not find freedom in Bunyan....Instead, they find ever repeated images of restraint, resignation, and endurance.”³² The March girls are guided by Mother’s “sermon”(45) and “preachment”(393) during their journey to their Celestial City: “led by her mother’s hand,” Jo “had drawn nearer to the Friend who welcomes every child with love stronger than that of any father, tenderer than that of any mother”(82). Although Sicherman comments in her note that “It is religion without spirituality, and salvation without Christ,”³³ Marmee seems to play a Christ-like role and her ultimate aim is to take her girls to the motherly and loving God.

Alcott emphasizes Mother's discipline through love; Mother didn't exact strict obedience from her four girls. When Amy took "several tingling blows on her little palm"(69) as punishment from her school teacher Mr. Davis, Mother "comforted her afflicted little daughter in her tenderest manner" and made Amy quit her school at once, saying "I don't approve of corporal punishment, especially for girls"(70). Amy had never been struck before "for during the twelve years of her life she had been governed by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her before"(69). And Mother's loving care for her children contrasts strikingly with Aunt March's disciplinary attitude toward Amy: "she worried Amy very much with her rules and orders, her prim ways, and long, prosy talks" and "took Amy in hand, and taught her as she herself had been taught sixty years ago—a process which carried dismay to Amy's soul, and made her feel like a fly in the web of a very strict spider"(191). Mother's way of disciplining her girls through love, which is the exact opposite of the severe Calvinistic childrearing, corresponds to what Richard Brodhead calls "disciplinary intimacy" or "this strategy of nonauthoritarianism."³⁴

It is obvious that Marmee's anti-patriarchal power in moralistic teaching, feminized Christianity, and discipline through love has originated in the "home." As many critics have pointed out,³⁵ the overt message in *Little Women* is that "a woman's happiest kingdom is home"(399) and the reader is advised "to be what Mother is"(306). Though Elizabeth Keyer writes that Meg's marriage "exemplifies the constrictions—physical, mental, and emotional," and concludes that "marriage arrests female development,"³⁶ the "women's sphere" in Alcott's concept is much less restrictive and oppressive than has been defined by "the cult of true womanhood": Mrs. March didn't hesitate to say to her daughters, "better be happy old maids than unhappy wives"(98). This point becomes clearer when we

closely look at Beth's short life. Beth is the most housewifely and unselfish girl that wanted to live for others and "helped Hannah keep home neat and comfortable for the workers"(38). Her dream is "to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family"(143). We can say that she is an ideal little woman who has fully understood the overt message of *Little Women*. But her sickly life and her early death indicate that Beth's life confined too much to her home is not exactly what Alcott wants women to cultivate. After all, as Fetterley says, "to be a little woman is to be dead."³⁷

The fact that Marmee's power is exerted not only on her daughters but also on an orphan who lives nextdoor to the Marches testifies that Marmee's "home" is not limited but rather boundless and expanding. Living only with his grandfather in a big stately stone mansion, Laurie felt deserted and hated "a lonely, lifeless sort of house, for no children frolicked on the lawn, no motherly face ever smiled at the windows"(47). So he sometimes looked longingly over at the Marches' house to see them enjoy domestic love and happiness. The mere sight of Mrs. March's face greatly consoled the motherless boy, who thought that "when the lamps are lighted, it's like looking at a picture to see the fire, and you all round the table with your mother; her face is right opposite, and it looks so sweet behind the flowers, I can't help watching it. I haven't got any mother, you know" (50). Also Mr. Laurence acknowledged the superiority of Mrs. March's power: "Mrs. March is doing more for him than we can"(59). In fact, Laurie was delivered from loneliness by Jo, who faithfully followed Mother's advice about helping others and visited Laurie to amuse him successfully. When Mr. Laurence noticed a change taking place in his grandson, he cried, "There was color, light, and life in the boy's face now, vivacity in his manner, and genuine merriment in his laugh" (54).

It is true that, as a result of many readers' requests, Alcott made all the March girls except Beth enter into matrimony in the novel. But by closely examining the March girls' married life, we can see that the boundaries of the domestic sphere "home" are undoubtedly blurring. Meg started her married life "with the determination to be a model housekeeper"(273), but she was so deeply absorbed in her children, and, as she was "a womanly little woman" and "the maternal instinct was very strong"(388), she was compelled to score a tragic failure: John often went to his friend's house and didn't come home. When Meg "looked worn and nervous"(389), Mother advised her not to confine herself in her home: "Don't shut yourself up in a bandbox because you are a woman, but understand what is going on, and educate yourself to take your part in the world's work, for it all affects you and yours"(392).

Amy's dream was to go to Rome and to be "the best artist in the whole world" (143), but she finally decided to have her home and family with Laurie and to encourage and support others to "fulfill their dreams of beauty"(489). With Laurie's fortune, Amy planned to help "many talented young fellows" without money to realize their dreams, and to "found and endow an institution for the express benefit of young women with artistic tendencies"(459-60). Remaining steadfastly in the "women's rightful place," Amy made an effort to use her woman's power to help others outside her home. When Amy felt that "their pleasant home was more homelike because they hoped to brighten other homes"(460), we can say that her domestic sphere has been enlarged to a great extent.

Even Jo got married at the end of the story to Professor Bhaer, although she was an ambitious girl when she was young and went so far as to declare, "I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle—something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead.... I think I shall write books, and get

rich and famous”(143). After her marriage, she said, “I haven’t given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences...”(489). Some critics severely criticize Jo’s (and also Alcott’s) changing her stance as an unsatisfactory compromise, but Jo’s “long-cherished plan” can attest that she is never a captive at all in her married life.³⁸ When Jo inherited Aunt March’s big house Plumfield, she made a plan to “open a school for little lads—a good, happy, homelike school”(482). Jo explained: “I’d hire a big house, and pick up some poor, forlorn little lads who hadn’t any mothers, and take care of them.... I seem to feel their wants, and sympathize with their troubles, and, oh, I should so like to be a mother to them” (482). Jo’s “maternal way of all mankind”(489), emphasized at the end of the story, shows that she intends to use her matriarchal power to expand her domestic world outward. When her school was established, it “would function into public world as a ‘moral equivalent of home’.”³⁹ As has been aptly pointed out by Brodhead, “Jo becomes the Marmee of the next generation, performing the mother’s work of character making in the extended family of Plumfield.”⁴⁰

In conclusion, Alcott’s “home” is not the place where women are treated as captives, but the site where women can use their loving and helping power to influence others and enlarge the vision of “home”. As a “domestic feminist” (Clark and Strickland’s term)⁴¹ Alcott has found a moderate way of subverting the patriotic society in the mid-nineteenth century. Paradoxically, women’s self-denial serves to solidify their social identity in *Little Women*. If “girls’ literature ought to help to build up women,”⁴² Alcott’s novel can be read as a guidebook of construction of female identity in the “home,” as in the case of *The American Woman’s Home* written by Stowe and her sister.

Reexamining the concept of “home” in *The Gates Ajar* and *Little Women*, we

can see that both novels are deeply concerned with the women's power of moving from the home outward, in full accordance with Stowe's new idea of home, which aims at "inventing the private sphere with a great deal of potential power."⁴³ If, as Elizabeth Young insists, the Civil War, the background of both bestsellers, can be defined as "a way of freeing themselves from the stifling imperatives of being a civil, civilizing sex"⁴⁴ for white women, the American Victorian women writers such as Stowe, Phelps, and Alcott found it possible to assert women's power in the "home" only after the war. In this sense, the Civil War marks an important turning point in their literary careers.

Notes

- 1 Cathy N. Davidson, "Preface: No More Separate Spheres!," *American Literature* 70.3 Sep. (1998): 443; Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70.3 Sep. (1998): 581-606.
- 2 Monika M. Elbert, "introduction," *Separate Spheres No More: Gender Convergence in American Literature 1830-1930*, ed. Monika M. Elbert (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2000) 3.
- 3 Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (1869; Hartford: Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, 1996)
- 4 Elbert 13.
- 5 For further details of this point, see Motoko Aimoto, "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Enlarged Vision of 'Home' in *Oldtown Folks*," *Journal of the Society of English and American Literature of Kwansei Gakuin University* 44.2 (2000): 53-69.
- 6 Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *History of Women in the United States: Historical Articles on Women's lives and Activities*, ed. Nancy F. Cott, vol. 4 (New York: K. G. Saur, 1992) 49.
- 7 Lisa A. Long, "'The Corporeity of Heaven': Rehabilitating the Civil War Body in *The Gates Ajar*," *American Literature* 69.4 Dec. (1997):783.
- 8 Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters from a Life* (Boston: 1896) 98, qtd. in Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999) 69; Elaine Showalter, introduction, *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott (1868;

- New York: Penguin Books, 1989) xv.
- 9 Helen Sootin Smith, introduction, *The Gates Ajar*, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1869; Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1964) vi.
- 10 Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1988) 84, 82.
- 11 Carol Farley Kessler, *Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982).
- 12 Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar*, (1869; Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1964) 10. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.
- 13 Long 793-94.
- 14 Nancy Schnog, "'The Comfort of My Fancying': Loss and Recuperation in *The Gates Ajar*," *Arizona Quarterly* 49.1 (1993): 29.
- 15 Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) 94-102.
- 16 Long 798.
- 17 Schnog 35.
- 18 Showalter xix.
- 19 Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, *Little Women: A Family Romance* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999) 19, 20.
- 20 Keyser 21.
- 21 Showalter xv.
- 22 Showalter xv.
- 23 Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (New York: Avon, 1978) 9, qtd in Keyser 21; Nina Auerbach, afterword, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1868; New York: Bantam Books, 1983) 467. See also Ann Douglas, "Introduction to *Little Women*," *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays* ed. Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999) 52.
- 24 Judith Fetterley, "*Little Women*: Alcott's Civil War," Alberghene and Clark 28, 37.
- 25 Douglas 49.
- 26 Nina Auerbach, "Waiting Together: Alcott on Matriarchy," Alberghene and Clark 8; Douglas 58.
- 27 Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, (1868; New York: Penguin Books, 1989) 227. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

- 28 Auerbach, afterword 463.
- 29 Anne K. Phillips, "The Prophets and the Martyrs: Pilgrims and Missionaries in *Little Women* and *Jack and Jill*," Alberghene and Clark 222.
- 30 Fetterley 30.
- 31 Barbara Sicherman, "Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text," *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays* ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995) 258.
- 32 Linda K. Kerber, "Can a Woman Be an Individual? The Limits of Puritan Tradition in the Early Republic," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 25 (1983), qtd in Phillips 214.
- 33 Sicherman 420.
- 34 Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 93, 18.
- 35 See Fetterley 30, Douglas 52, and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, "The Most Beautiful Things in All the World? Families in *Little Women*," Alberghene and Clark 86.
- 36 Keyser, "The Most Beautiful Things" 87.
- 37 Fetterley 38.
- 38 As for severe criticism of Jo's compromise, see Fetterley, Keyser, "The Most Beautiful Things," and Auerbach, afterword.
- 39 Susan Laird, "Learning from Marmee's Teaching: Alcott's Response to Girls' Miseducation," Alberghene and Clark 301.
- 40 Brodhead 71.
- 41 Beverly Lyon Clark, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Little Woman," *Children's Literature* 17 (1989): 97; Charles Strickland, *Victorian Domesticity: Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott* (University: U of Alabama P, 1985) 145, qtd in Keyser, *Little Women* 22.
- 42 Edward Salmon, "Should Children Have a Special Literature?" *Parent's Review* 5 (1890): 337-44, qtd in Showalter xv.
- 43 Christine Doyle, "Transatlantic Translations: Communities of Education in Alcott and Brontë," Alberghene and Clark 274.
- 44 Young xiii.